

Pokeweed *Phytolacca americana*



Perennial herb, to 3 m tall, often with many stems from large fleshy rootstock. Stems green to purplish, fleshy, smooth. Leaves alternate, light green, lanceolate, 8 to 30 cm long, 3 to 12 cm wide, glabrous, margins entire. Flowers white to purplish in drooping axillary racemes. Ripe fruit black, juicy, many seeded, when mashed produces a red "ink." Distributed throughout the South; most

common on waste ground, fence rows, pasture, and old homesites. Young leaves often used as a cooked green vegetable; older leaves are quite poisonous.

Toxicity

The poisonous principles are oxalic acid and a saponin called phytolaccotoxin. In addition, alkaloids may be present. The root of the plant is the most toxic portion, but all other parts of the plant contain smaller amounts of the toxic principles. Cattle, horses, swine, and humans have all been poisoned after consuming this plant. Recognizable clinical cases are rare, however. Swine are most often affected since they grub up the roots.

Poisoning occurs during spring, summer, or fall. In the springtime people commonly cook the leaves and consume them. This "poke salad" is generally safe if the water in which the leaves are cooked is poured off.

Symptoms

The most common symptom is a severe gastroenteritis with cramping, diarrhea, and convulsions. Postmortem lesions include severe ulcerative gastritis, mucosal hemorrhage, and a dark liver. In most cases the animal recovers within 24 to 48 hours.

Treatment

Give gastrointestinal protectives such as mineral oil or various clays. Administer tannic acid and sedatives; a specific antidote is dilute vinegar. Provide respiratory stimulants.